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Constructing Discursive Differences. Towards a "Logic" of Cities

Petra Gehring & Andreas Großmann *

Abstract: »Konstruktion diskursiver Differenzen. Zu einer ‚Logik‘ von Städten«.

The article examines an example to consider how the research approach focusing on the "intrinsic logic" of cities can be linked with the methodology of a Foucauldian discourse analysis. The discourse paradigm is related to the empirical base of a corpus analysis of urban "problem discourses". In statements about "problems", these discourses implicate, along with the question of power, the question of the perception and construction of the individual city as a social-spatial form of meaning and practice. This can be demonstrated in exemplary form in the problem discourses of the cities Frankfurt am Main, Dortmund, Birmingham, and Glasgow. The authors suggest that the findings yielded by the methodologically innovative link between philosophical and empirical analysis should be used not only for the research approach "intrinsic logic" of cities as presented here, but also more broadly inasmuch as differences in social space and discursive differences are closely intertwined.

Keywords: Discourse, urban space, problem, power, action patterns, intrinsic logic of cities.

1. How to Construct the "Differences" of this City? Cities, the Spatial, and the Discursive

It is obvious that cities are different from each other. But it also makes a difference how and by means of what models these differences are studied. Measured differences (that is, differences that are plotted on a generalized scale) are one thing, singular situations (and thus qualitatively different situations) are something completely different. The German discussion that has been ongoing for some time about an individual "logic" or an "intrinsic logic" of cities (Berking and Löw 2008) draws attention to this point. Not as a substitute for quantitative or other well established forms of social research, grounded on generalized models or on a general theory of "society" or "the city" as such,

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but as an additional perspective, a heuristics addressing singular phenomena can open new perspectives.

If general social scientific perspectives and overarching comparative parameters are simply deductively applied to cities, differences will indeed be found between them – but we will fail to focus on this (individual) city, and thus fail to uncover the genuine properties that may be specific only to this city – city “X” as distinct from other cities. Parameter-based research is mainly a mirror to reflect parameter-bound features that as such we already know in general and a priori for all cities equally. What is referred to as intrinsic logic calls for a heuristic research procedure that is intent not on regarding cities as particular cases of a general whole (of society), but rather on determining the singularity of urban practices and their meaning as precisely as possible. Beyond subsumptive strategies of “identification” or “characterization” cities can be “individualized”, to use a Foucauldian term (cf. Gehring 2008). In this sense, recent sociological urban research has good reason to recommend a paradigm switch not only “from general societal problems to be studied in the city to the city as an empirical given”, but also “from the city to cities” (cf. Berking 2012, 317, 322). Corresponding to this idea of a plurality of urban life-worlds (and even realities) is a concept of space that is no longer “absolute” or container-like, but relational, practice-based, and potentially heterogeneous (Löv 2001; Alpsancar, Gehring and Rölli 2011).

Inductive procedures that are heuristically open in seeking potentially singular features of entire cities are rare in empirical urban research. This also applies to the comparison of cities: distinguishable characteristics are something that is measurable. But the singular becomes at best indirectly visible: identification procedures have to be combined with comparative; but it is not immediately clear according to what rules. Must characteristic features of cities necessarily remain an impressionistic factor, something for flâneurs (Hessel 1929; Benjamin 1983, 1982), or for those referred to as urban biographers (above all Hibbert 1969, 1985, 1993; Large 2002; Richter 2005; Mak 2006)? In fact, despite pioneering works (Taylor et al. 1996), explorative qualitative studies have difficulty gaining access to the city as a research object. For the city is a highly aggregated entity: though it is intuitively clear that there are cities, heuristic access to them is difficult if characteristic features of entire cities are supposed to be made visible by empirical means; for local policy research, this is a reason to approach the topic quite cautiously (cf. Zimmermann 2008). If local practices are studied, then considerable abstraction is required to infer local structures that are manifested in such practices. Inferring forms of reproduction of such structures (which will again be local) again involves abstractions. Concepts such as “atmosphere” (Böhme 1998), “habitus of the city”, or “Gestalt” (Lindner 2003, 2006) absorb this embarrassment. They counteract the problem, but remain empirically vague. Thus, not least for reasons of observability, it is advisable to use a methodologically *controlled exploration of symbolic repre-*

sentations of a city, of narrations, or “images” (urban pictures) (Lynch 1960, 1984; Löw 2008, 140ff) to access local structures and forms of reproduction of them. That they provide information only indirectly is a matter of course. The *self-presentation of cities*, the self-images and talk about the city are in the first place *symbolizations*, and in the second place themselves part of the city as a functional component of the texture of urban practice (for example, a huge advertising display or a certain colour code) – which is a “texture” in a performative sense, a layer of forms that is neither *only* symbolic nor simply tacit or material, in which the city (re)produces itself. However, if there is such a thing as a “logic” of cities, then the symbolizations of a city do not have the privilege of proclaiming it; rather, self-presentations must for their part be read as city-specific actions. In this point, too, what and how something can make an appearance in the name of the city is part of the city.

2. Urban Problem Discourses – A Case Example

Since the structures of a city that can be conjectured to pertain to its “intrinsic logic” can only be elicited in a heuristically open contrast with other cities, the logic of research demands a comparative approach to the topic. Moreover, sets of cities with a maximum degree of similarity with regard to their basic social structure would be particularly interesting in the search for individual features. The cities that were examined in the study presented here have to be highly comparable in certain respects to make it possible to detect against this background those *differences* that permit us to speak of an “intrinsic logic”.

Our study focuses on four cities, two of them German, two British. For Germany, these are Frankfurt am Main and Dortmund, for the United Kingdom Birmingham and Glasgow. The comparison of cities is international in scope in order to be able to take account of the national framework in determining specific urban practices. The selected cities have important features in common: on the one hand they are not capitals or “mega-cities”, on the other hand they are of comparable size, density and internal heterogeneity; moreover, they have a comparable historical tradition and similar economic structural data. Dortmund and Glasgow are characterized above all by local industries, Frankfurt am Main and Birmingham by their roles as significant trading and banking centres. Moreover, in the past decades all four cities have been confronted by structural change that to a certain extent is still a challenge to them and which they have handled with different degrees of success. One conjecture was that aside from everything else such differences may provide evidence of distinctive urban features – for example in the specificity of each city’s current problem discourses in the focus of our research interest. By “problem discourse” we mean the body of all themes, thresholds of addressing themes, and forms of addressing themes that explicitly generate a need for action in *this* city. Explicit

talk of something *as* a city problem – as well as the discursive form, the patterns of thought by means of which this talk is organized – is thus deemed to be the decisive datum for the determination of the “problem discourse” of the city.

In our case study, we treat four urban problem landscapes that were extracted from an extensive corpus of newspaper articles and political documents as structured discourses, each of which is for itself quite complex. These are certainly not self-sufficient or rigid structures. And they are embedded in a broad stream of generally similar, more or less insignificant patterns, a kind of “basic noise” that we do not regard as part of the discourse in our focused, methodological sense. It is decisive for the profile of a discourse as well as for the comparative analysis of discursive features of cities that not only what is communicated as a problem is taken into consideration, but above all by means of what authorizations, self-attributions, attribution by others, performative strategies, and forms urban problems are named and discussed. *What* is addressed in a city as a problem is, according to our hypothesis, not independent of *how* it is addressed (which must be subjected to a detailed linguistic study). For the manner in which problems – specifically traffic noise, constraints to economize, worries concerning criminality, administrative failure, or the “future” in general – are addressed is itself a part of the practices of the city, and thus part of its self-image: it is part of its (conjectured) “intrinsic logic”.

3. A “Spatial” Discourse Analysis? Towards a Mixed Methodology

3.1 The Methodological Framework of Discourse Analysis

Our starting point is that the question of cities can be linked with the concept of discourse and the instruments of text-content research. The term “*discourse*” (*discours*) in the sense related to knowledge is derived from French epistemology (Foucault 1969), and stands for a research programme whose starting point is between the agents and abstract structural conditions – thus providing access both to action patterns and to symbolic patterns. Discourses are utterance orders, not individual speech acts or passages in documents, but rather regularly recurrent patterns and forms, speech habitualities that emerge from a collectivity of factually uttered statements. From a purely linguistic point of view, these statements could have been made differently than they in fact were; and for this reason, it says a lot about the given propositional and epistemic context that it only works this way and not differently: that “then” or “there” one speaks this way and not in another way – and that one cannot speak successfully in any other way. Discourses organize spaces of possibility for what can be said which are typical of the time, institution, or place. In this respect they are related to power structures (Foucault 1972).

Inasmuch as “statements” (énoncés) and orders of knowledge are accordingly not understood as semantic units, but rather as performances (and their concrete horizons of enablement), discourse analysis can be logically understood following Foucault as a praxeological procedure. Though texts are the material, what is reconstructed is practices of meaning production: thematic preferences, typical rhetorical phrasings, patterns of interpretation, positions of speaker and addressee. At the same time, orders of behaviour come to light: paths of characteristic speech show what is done (and thus what can be done) and what not.

This is compatible with the knowledge-based approach of a genuine “distinctiveness of cities”: Urban discourses can be seen as decisive elements of the formation of an urban individuality that lies beyond (material, structural, or anthropological) models of a generalized “society” or “social”. A comparative study of discourses on urban problems can serve as a test case for this perspective: a study of how something comes to be addressed as a specific problem situation of this city. A theory of discourse can be integrated into the frameworks of urban theory (i.e. a theory of “the” city) as well as into policy analysis – in this connection, the methodological instruments of an empirical, social scientific approach and those of an approach that targets the pragmatics of texts are directly complementary to each other. The research presented in this contribution attempts to demonstrate this by means of a focus on “problem discourses”.

3.2 The Focus on the Spaces of a City

What is regarded in Frankfurt, Dortmund, Birmingham, or Glasgow as an important, urgent “problem” for the city, perhaps even one that is explicitly designated as specific to the city concerned? Guided by this question – developed in a collaborative project with political scientists interested in the (resulting) procedures of political agenda setting – the discourse concept opens a comparative perspective not only on governance practices responding to (existing) problems or discursively shaping/re-shaping problems, but also on the constitution of a city – this city – itself. Nonetheless, the specific perspective must be precisely determined. The first point is the discursive construction of problem situations. According to Foucault’s pattern, discourses have at least four axes: They address subject matters as topics, they prefer certain utterance modalities (speaker roles, authorization markers, subject positions), they deploy certain concepts, metaphors etc., and are organized according to characteristic rhetorical strategies (cf. Foucault 1969, 55ff). Thus, the analysis does not by any means completely disregard text contents. But it also takes the practical forms of what is said into consideration as they are filtered by the concrete circumstances and aim at specific effect in a social space. The point is: what gives what is said its unmistakable characteristic and ensures that it now belongs to what Wittgenstein calls a “language game” (Sprachspiel) (Wittgenstein 1952, 241)? In this way, the forms of what is said will themselves be understood as

practices, and they will be addressed as topics with respect to how they are enmeshed with other practices (in the broadest sense political practices).

Part of the methodological framework of a discourse analysis is an enhanced awareness of the fact that discourses do not only reflect their surroundings. Rather, they structure social worlds and also successively establish social worlds. With Foucault, this constructivist assumption first made its impact in the history of knowledge. But it also encompasses space (Foucault 1984), and it can be quite readily applied to the self-delimiting social space of a city, as Foucault himself suggested (Foucault 1982). The focus on “space” and the spaces of a city, on the concrete conditions in action space and the horizons of possibility of *this* city poses questions of existential knowledge, of real everyday orientation, of belonging and non-belonging, of inside and outside. The discursive construction of self-relationships also has a social-spatial aspect. A city “we” can thus be consciously distinguished from “the others”.

Exploring the genuine logic of the four analysed cities from a discourse analytical angle means above all that the wealth of material has to be examined comparatively and as unbiasedly as possible, and that in so doing, among others, quantitative procedures must be brought to bear. As discourse analysis up to now has been an established method mainly in linguistics, literature, historiography, in general: in text analysis, a certain transfer to the field of “urban” phenomena was necessary. To this end, one idea in particular was paramount: that the social-spatial reality of urbanity, the perception of *this* city cannot be separated from its discursive form: as constellations of spaces of possibility, cities are constituted equally by discursive practices and by material givens – and all the material, supposedly silent aspects of urban life only take on meaning in discursive channels (Foucault 1969).

The evaluation of the data, which consist of articles and minutes gathered uniformly for all the cities, yields striking results: quite specific propositional patterns and surprisingly significant differences. These are thematic differences: there are specific topics elaborated as “own” and prioritized as “urgent” problems, and it is also found that different problems are addressed under similarly worded headlines (weather, economic crisis, traffic). But there are also differences in tropes, forms of dramatization, and turns of phrase, in the forms of stylization of urban relevance: that is, the relevance of a problem for our, for this city. Moreover, there are different forms of stylization of the city itself – beginning with the frequency with which the name of the city is used (a striking result: Frankfurt refers to itself as “Frankfurt” almost twice as often as Dortmund refers to itself as “Dortmund”).

The abundance of empirical findings generates observations and diagnostic conjectures. How can they be consolidated to yield results, perhaps even a hypothesis about a logic (Eigenlogik) of the cities? In fact, the task of “individualizing” discursive units is a crucial point in discourse analysis inasmuch as it takes us beyond the mass of detail of the observed findings: “si unité il y a,

elle n'est point dans la cohérence visible et horizontale des éléments formés; elle réside, bien en deçà, dans le système qui rend possible et régit leur formation"¹ (Foucault 1969, 95). This can be demonstrated by adducing exemplary statements in which the problem discourses of Frankfurt, Dortmund, Birmingham, and Glasgow make use of emotionally and morally dramatizing terms such as "crisis" (Krise), "chaos" (Chaos), "worry/concern" (Sorge/Besorgnis), "anger" (Wut), and "fear" (Furcht).

3.3 A Comparative Analysis of Urban Problem Discourses

The analysis of the problem discourses in the four cities builds on text corpora for the year 2010 derived in particular from the main local newspapers in addition to council minutes and interviews with local politicians and civil activists. The corpus for Frankfurt comprises 2174 newspaper articles (from the local newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Rundschau*), for Dortmund 2033 newspaper articles (from the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Ruhr-Nachrichten*), for Glasgow 1005 newspaper articles (from the *Evening Times*), and for Birmingham 1924 newspaper articles (from the *Birmingham Mail*). The corpus was systematically coded using Maxqda, a software designed for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method research. All texts that stated an urban problem were screened and transferred into the corpus. In analysing the newspaper articles our focus was not to find out causes of and solutions for problems (though that might be a legitimate interest of policy analysis). Rather, we take what was coded as a problem in different policy fields in a more general and yet concrete sense, namely as part of a discursive practice that determines in some way action and spatial patterns. In this sense, the analysis is explorative. Guided by the assumption that cities are socio-spatial forms of meaning and practice (sozial-räumliche Sinn- und Praxisformen), the comparative analysis is intended to identify differences in urban problem discourses.

Some examples can illustrate our approach. All four metropolises are plagued by traffic problems. In fact, reporting in the media regularly and uniformly speaks of "traffic chaos". However, the manners in which the issues are addressed as problems display remarkable differences. Thus, the "problem" in Frankfurt – traffic chaos caused by illicit parking and by construction sites – is given a positive turn in order to emphasize the city's significance and capability to act: traffic causes problems, but it stands for prosperity. A construction site can thus be regarded as a sign "that real work is being done" (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 27 May 2010). Whereas in Frankfurt traffic chaos is frequently lamented around schools, in Dortmund it is for the most part shopping centres

¹ Authors' translation: If there is unity, it is not at all in the visible, horizontal coherence of the formed elements; rather, it is located prior to them, in the system that makes their formation possible and regulates it.

and discount stores that are cited in connection with traffic and parking problems. “Chaotic” or “catastrophic” traffic problems are criticized; however, action options are doubted or even directly denied. There is in general the impression that “there is nothing that can be done” (Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, 9 September 2010). By comparison, in Birmingham traffic chaos is coded in a technical, pragmatic manner as “a question of enforcement” (“We have got to start enforcing the rules,” Birmingham Mail, 17 February 2010); with regard to image, the situation is linked to the expectation that the city should end the problem “to make Birmingham a truly world-class city” (Birmingham Mail, 1 April 2010). In Glasgow, by contrast, the necessary cooperation of the responsible bodies and persons is called for. “Glasgow City Council must work very closely with Amey, Transport Scotland and the police to ensure incidents are dealt with quickly and traffic hold-ups minimised” (Evening Times, 1 September 2010). “We want to work with city centre venues to encourage renewed interest in a night out in the city centre. We also want to work more closely with the underground” (Evening Times, 5 January 2010). The perspective is forward-looking, traffic chaos caused by construction work is regarded as a community project and a sign of regional enhancement.

The work is part of a massive infrastructure investment in Scotland’s transport network which includes [...] improvements to the railway between Edinburgh and Glasgow and further improvements to the central Scotland motorway network (Evening Times, 25 February 2010).

Thus, the city treasurer can say optimistically that the impending extensive street construction demanded by citizens to repair the numerous potholes “will be warmly welcomed by drivers, cyclists, bus passengers and pedestrians as well” (Evening Times, 29 January 2010).

Whereas in the German cities in the study the term “crisis” mostly refers to the general economic and finance crisis, and beyond that – specifically in Dortmund – to the municipal “budget crisis”, in Birmingham and Glasgow potholes resulting from two severe winters in succession can be a reason for talk of a “crisis”. “Crisis” then describes a local situation. The metropolis Frankfurt regards itself as a “growing” city, emphatically as “central” and as the “best family city in Germany” (with corresponding expectations on its image) (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 15 March 2010 and 26 March 2010; Frankfurter Rundschau, 10 July 2010); the issue that in Frankfurt is deemed to be a sign of the prosperity and attractiveness of the city, at best secondarily to be a challenge to the city, is dramatized in Birmingham as calling for immediate action: the “baby boom” of recent years can be straightforwardly characterized as a “baby boom crisis” (Birmingham Mail, 5 April 2010) since it involves an increased need for primary schools. The city sees “that drastic action is needed” (Birmingham Mail, 22 October 2010) although at the same time it realizes that it is faced with the notorious finance crisis (Birmingham Mail, 1 December 2010).

In Birmingham's problem discourses, its "size" is often referred to not only as a characteristic of the city, but also as one of its problems – one that is linked with problems of social and ethnic diversification and division. Birmingham's "inner city" as a whole thus seems to be an expansive, overstretched space "which has experienced a growth in violent crime and suffers problems with racial tensions" (Birmingham Mail, 13 February 2010). In contrast to Birmingham, schools in Glasgow are not perceived as places at which social, ethnic, and religious tensions are concentrated, but rather as places of successful integration (cf. Evening Times, 16 and 18 November 2010). In Glasgow, too, the "pothole crisis" is seen with anxiety in view of limited financial latitude (Evening Times, 14 January 2010). "The roads need to be strong, but for that we need more money. There will always be a need for more funding for road maintenance" (Evening Times, 22 October 2010). Thus, crisis diagnoses result in reserved demands for action. At any rate, for the time being the city finds it possible "to spend £ 8 m more than usual on repairs to tackle the crisis" (Evening Times, 27 April 2010).

In a city like Dortmund, the strained budget situation is regularly a reason to claim that the municipality is not in a position to take action. Moreover, there is one specific area in the city, "north town" (Nordstadt), that embodies a kind of gap in the interior, an area of administrative helplessness. There is talk of "fear of characters from Romania and Bulgaria, fear of drug-related crime, fear of the powerlessness of the authorities". People think they are at the edge of an abyss, and political officeholders have abandoned the expectation "that the problem can be eliminated" (Ruhr-Nachrichten, 26 August 2010; cf. Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, 31 August 2010). In problem discourses in Glasgow, by contrast, talk of the crisis does not by any means lead to resignation. All the more do people feel constrained "to stand up for Glasgow" (the title of a campaign in the *Evening Times*) whenever the substance of public institutions seems to be threatened by austerity plans of the central government in London. Thus, with a view to the past social problems of the city, which even now are still enormous, the crisis is seen as a challenge to "all politicians, officials, business leaders and unions (to) fight for this city" (Evening Times, 21 October 2010). Once again, the "spirit of collaboration" is invoked "to work together in the city's interest to ensure Glasgow does not suffer lasting damage as a result of excessive cutbacks". For "this current economic crisis must not be allowed to create misery for another generation" (Evening Times, 11 October 2010).

The exemplary findings show: It is not only what is perceived in the cities as a phenomenon of "chaos", "crisis" or "anxiety" that is interesting. If we wish to understand why cities act in this way and not differently, how they see themselves, that is, what "logic" they adhere to, the decisive point is how the perceived problems are treated in discourse, how distinct perceptions and discourses determine practices and how they generate action patterns – that at the same time are also spatial patterns.

4. The Outcome of our Studies

The proposal to study the – potentially specific – manner in which urban discourses deal with a city's problems with methods derived from text analysis, transferring these methods to the context of an empirical study of practices, is not restricted to extracting a certain typical character from a city's linguistic performances, a kind of discursive idiom, and in the case of problem discourses a certain style in the verbal treatment of urban conflict situations and challenges. It also means posing the question of power as a constitutive element of the cities' problem discourses and of the cities' intrinsic logic, which is also a spatial logic in general.

We thus return to what we above called the constructivist character of discourse analysis. The study of problem discourses is not a survey of objective deficits in cities. It is empirically questionable whether and, if at all, where the measured traffic volume in Frankfurt exceeds Dortmund's as a whole. "Traffic problem" and "commuter problem" have numerous functions in discourse: in addition to the reference to a factual situation also the affirmation of certain styles of politics and patterns of perception and identification in this city. The large number of people who commute for job reasons and the consequent traffic volume in Frankfurt are seen as signs of the attractiveness of the city; the state of the streets and of buildings and the consequent problems in Dortmund, which are often judged to be "catastrophic", are a reason to complain about unclear responsibilities and competencies on the level of municipal administration or about the limited or even non-existent scope of action due to the municipality's precarious financial situation. "Traffic chaos" and "pothole crisis" are a reason for direct demands that the city take action in Birmingham; in Glasgow, it is known that the city "is not the only place with a pothole problem" (Evening Times, 14 January 2010); hence, in times of financial crisis it is rather external stipulations, whether on the part of the London government or of the Scottish government, that are perceived to be problematical and subjected to critical or angry scrutiny (cf. Evening Times, 21 October 2010 und 29 January 2010).

On the other hand, however, the examination of problem discourses yields more than just information on the state of mind, mere local opinions, sentiments, attitudes, and mentalities. If not only the message, but also the infrastructure of what is said is analysed, the supposedly subjective view is integrated into a more comprehensive overall picture. The highly aggregated and linguistically formalized exploration of statements and "discourses" is quite consciously dissociated from personalized constructs such as opinion or "attitude". This perspective runs in a completely different direction from personalizing interpretation patterns; it pertains to the city itself, which has a "logic" – as evinced by observations such as those presented above on the coding of

“chaos” and “crisis” – that cannot be reduced to anthropomorphic metaphors in any of the four cities studied.

Finally, the study of problem discourses is not a kind of research that is subject to the objection that it confuses language with reality. Admittedly, the path of text-bound statements does not lead back to the level of a world of silent objects, “on ne revient pas à l’en deçà du discours” [authors’ translation: if there is unity, it is not at all in the visible, horizontal coherence of the formed elements; rather, it is located prior to them, in the system that makes their formation possible and regulates it] (Foucault 1969, 66). However, the reality of cities is not one of motionless building walls, cars creeping ahead and flickering street-lamps; rather it is a reality of knowledge, perhaps of “knowledgescapes” (Matthiesen 2008), namely locally distributed knowledge, differentiated knowledge that also reproduces differences. And if problem discourses implicitly refer to power questions (and, hence, also questions of power and space), then this particular significance of these local, very specific power structures can only be understood on the basis of the differentiating realm of statements.

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